

Program Notes with Text & Translations

Mass in C minor, K.427 (417a) (“The Great”)

By Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Mozart's last setting of the words of the Roman Catholic Mass, though unfortunately incomplete, is far and away his greatest, in large part because of his recent opportunity to study the oratorios and sacred music of Handel and, even more importantly, the instrumental works of Bach. In the Viennese library of Baron von Swieten he encountered these and other glories of Baroque music. Although fugue and other forms of polyphony were part of the Austrian church-music tradition and were incorporated in all of Mozart's earlier masses, where the “Great” C minor Mass stands out from the earlier ones is in the depth and inventiveness of his contrapuntal thinking, in his commitment to the style, and in his assurance in deploying it.

Mozart's first known sacred composition was a motet to an English text, “God Is Our Refuge,” K.20, written in London at the age of nine. In all, he wrote about 60 vocal works to religious texts. His sacred output during his final decade in Vienna was confined to the C minor Mass, two small motets, and the justly famous Requiem, of which only the motets were finished. Of all his religious works, the C minor Mass is the only one not written in response to a commission or request. Its commissioner was Mozart himself, and he was not a sufficiently insistent patron to compel the work's completion.

He conceived the work as an expression of piety and thanksgiving for his impending marriage to Constanze Weber. The wedding was solemnized in August 1782, but various events caused Mozart to put off the dreaded trip to Salzburg to present her to his disapproving father and a sister who was at least skeptical. The following January he protested in a letter that he really did intend to fulfill this filial duty, adding, “... the score of half a mass, which is still lying here waiting to be finished, is the best proof that I really made the promise.” Unfortunately, the work never progressed further. When the Mozarts traveled to Salzburg the next August, the “Credo” of the mass was still incomplete and there was no “Agnus Dei.”

We have Mozart's widow's statement that the Mass nevertheless was performed in Salzburg on August 25, 1783, not in the cathedral of the Archbishop by whom his father was still employed, but in the smaller church of St. Peter. Mozart had planned the occasion from the beginning with solos to be sung by his wife, probably to help convince his father and sister that he had, after all, made a good match for himself. Her singing, reportedly always weak and quavery, apparently did not impress them.

The idea of a religious piece written for the concert hall would have seemed strange to Mozart. All of his sacred music was designed and intended for performance in a church service. The C minor Mass, heard in relation to the religious practices of his time, is neither too elaborate nor too “operatic” for the Austrian church. In an era when archbishops often

were also noblemen, when an enlightened Emperor was busily engaged in revising the liturgy to suit his own ideas, when churches were confected of tumbling angels among floridly asymmetric clouds, church music was necessarily dramatic and ornate. Not since the Middle Ages, when service music was composed in anonymity by cloistered monks, has music for the church been markedly different from the best contemporary secular music. The C minor Mass obviously would not be used on just any occasion; its grandeur and the performing forces required to realize it mark the work as appropriate to special observances. Nevertheless, it was written for and performed in the context of an actual mass celebration.

The occasion over, Mozart put aside the uncompleted Mass and thought no further of it until 1785, when he needed a sacred cantata in a hurry. New Italian words, possibly by his opera librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte, were quickly fashioned to the music for the C minor Mass, and additional movements were added. By all accounts the result is at best a marriage of convenience. The cantata, *Davidde penitente* with texts based on penitential Psalms appropriate to the season of Lent, cannot be said to represent Mozart's final thoughts on the music in the Mass.

Until recently, most performances of this work have used the 1956 edition of H. C. Robbins Landon, which places all the music Mozart wrote for the Mass in playable condition but makes no attempt to substitute for his omissions. Various efforts have been made to devise completed versions, by such scholars as Helmut Eder (1985), Franz Beyer (1989), Richard Maunder (1990), and Philip Wilby (2004). The completion by Mozart scholar and performer Robert D. Levin, which is the version used at today's concert, has received much critical praise and a number of performances (as has Levin's similar reworking of the Mozart Requiem). Commissioned by Carnegie Hall, this edition received its premiere on January 15, 2005, with the soloists and chorus of the Carnegie Hall Choral Workshop and the Orchestra of St. Luke's conducted by Helmuth Rilling.

Levin drew on material from a number of sources, including Mozart sketches surviving from the early 1780s (both those obviously related to the Mass and others whose relation can only be conjectured), the extra music in *Davidde penitente* that does not derive from the known portions of the Mass, and knowledge of Mozart's practice in constructing his earlier mass settings. Where nothing existed that would suffice, he boldly resorted to composing new music in the appropriate style. After filling out the orchestration where called for in the existing sections, he added five movements in the "Credo" portion and created the missing two-movement "Agnus Dei" portion at the Mass's end. The result is some 25 minutes longer than what we had known before. Reviewing a performance in Cologne, Germany, Miguel Cabruja wrote,

In view of the uncommonly difficult condition of the score, with enormous gaps, it almost borders on a miracle how well Levin has projected himself into the world of Mozart and his language. The result is stylistically seamless and musically convincing: an absolutely Mozartean vision of a complete mass.

Whether heard in its unfinished state or in the new completed version, this Mass is one of the supreme achievements of Mozart's art, a combining of the glories of times past and the

increasingly secularized church music of his own day. Exalted choruses alternate with operatic solos and ensembles in a magnificent procession celebrating with joy and reverence the foundations of Roman Catholic worship. Time and again the C minor has been cited as the greatest Mass setting between the B-minor Mass of Bach and the *Missa solemnis* of Beethoven.

I. KYRIE

C minor was a key used by Mozart (as later by Beethoven) for dramatic and solemn effect. The noble, tragic mood is set by the orchestra with a pulsating figure that will be repeated and elaborated beneath the choral parts. Following the first “Kyrie eleison” section, the soprano solo presents the serene “Christe eleison” in E-flat, supported by choral interjections. The return of the choral “Kyrie” is masterful, with new development of the themes and a modulation back to C minor. The piece ends in soft supplication.

Kyrie eleison.
Christe eleison.
Kyrie eleison.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

II. GLORIA

2. Gloria in excelsis

Following the practice of his time for a “cantata mass” with multiple movements, Mozart has divided the “Gloria” text into seven movements. With a burst of radiance, the “Gloria in excelsis” begins *Allegro vivace*, followed by fugato entrances of the angelic choir, accompanied with festive pomp by full orchestra. “Et in terra pax” comes in contrasting pastoral style, to be pre-empted by a return of the “Gloria.”

Gloria in excelsis Deo,
et in terra pax
hominibus bonae voluntatis.

Glory to God on high,
and on earth peace
to people of good will.

3. Laudamus te

Music of Italian ebullience accompanies the soprano solo, even more florid than the “Christe.” The masterly vocal writing, with its heavenly melismas, sequential syncopations, pauses, and trills, allows the singer to glorify God with all the adornments of vocal art.

Laudamus te, benedicimus te,
adoramus te, glorificamus te.

We praise you, we bless you,
we worship you, we glorify you.

4. Gratias

The five-part chorus (with three women’s parts) brings to mind Bach’s method in the B-minor Mass. The majestic and austere mood is sustained throughout this short movement by the orchestra’s unwavering dotted rhythm. Unusual harmonic turns reinforce the stern atmosphere of the choral writing.

*Gratias agimus tibi
propter magnam gloriam tuam.*

We give thanks to you
for your great glory.

5. Domine Deus

The mood turns light and playful for a duet of sopranos. Bach comes to mind again as the felicitous polyphony unwinds. Crossing voices exchange high notes and take turns at crystalline melismas foreshadowing Mozart's own music for the Queen of the Night.

*Domine Deus, Rex coelestis,
Deus Pater omnipotens,
Domine Fili unigenite,
Jesu Christe, Domine Deus,
Agnus Dei, Filius Patris.*

O Lord God, heavenly King,
God the Father Almighty,
O Lord, the only begotten son,
Jesus Christ, Lord God,
Lamb of God, Son of the Father.

6. Qui tollis

Splendid writing for double chorus brings one of the work's most powerful religious moments. Soaring voices are supported by a dotted rhythmic figure proceeding unchangingly in the orchestra. Alfred Einstein said this movement is "quite evidently conceived as a representation of the Savior, making his way under whiplashes, and bearing the burden of the cross, toward Golgotha."

*Qui tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis,
Qui tollis peccata mundi,
suscipe deprecationem nostram.
Qui sedes ad dextram Patris,
miserere nobis.*

You who take away the sins of the world,
have mercy upon us.
You who take away the sins of the world,
receive our prayer.
You who sit at the right hand of the Father,
have mercy upon us.

7. Quoniam

With all the lilt of a Venetian concerto, a graceful trio of soloists alternates with the orchestral *tutti*. Fugal imitation and insouciant syncopation highlight the hymn of praise.

*Quoniam tu solus sanctus,
tu solus Dominus,
tu solus altissimus . . .*

For only you are holy,
only you are the Lord,
only you are most high . . .

8. Jesu Christe – Cum Sancto Spirito

Mozart reserves the last two words of the previous sentence for use as a solemn invocation, introducing the fugal finale of the "Gloria." The C-major subject, moving magisterially in whole notes, recalls the finale of his later "Jupiter" Symphony. In the midst of the fugue, Levin has added an optional cadenza for the two soprano soloists and the tenor, its music drawn from a similar cadenza Mozart placed between two parts of *Davidde penitente*.

Choral counterpoint of great power and superb complexity builds to a climax at the last repetition of the theme in octaves.

... *Jesu Christe.*
Cum Sancto Spiritu,
in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.

... Jesus Christ.
With the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

III. CREDO

9. Credo in unum Deum

Strings and winds set a new color, as the orchestra establishes the emphatic mood for a statement of belief. Once more using a five-part chorus, Mozart covers considerable text in a short time, giving each tenet of the creed its due place of honor. Here and in the next movement, orchestral parts in some places are incomplete, but Mozart's intentions were sufficiently clear for Levin to fill them in.

Credo in unum Deum,
Patrem omnipotentem,
factorem coeli et terrae,
visibilium omnium et invisibilium.

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty
maker of heaven and earth,
and of all things visible and invisible.

Credo et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum,
Filium Dei unigenitum,
et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula.
Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine,
Deum verum de Deo vero,
genitum, non factum,
consubstantialem Patri,
per quem omnia facta sunt,
qui propter nos homines
et propter nostram salutem
descendit de coelis.

I believe also in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only begotten Son of God,
begotten of his Father before all worlds.
God of God, light of light,
very God of very God,
begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father,
by whom all things were made,
who for us men
and for our salvation
came down from heaven.

10. Et incarnatus est

Neapolitan operatic splendor imbues the soprano solo, echoed by *obbligato* flute, oboe, and bassoon and supported by organ and strings. The virtuosic movement culminates in a rhapsodic cadenza for voice and woodwinds, prolonging the word "factus" as though enthralled by the mystery of God's being *made* into Man. Although Mozart never composed the rest of his Creed, its two existing movements are musically complete.

Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto
ex Maria virgine, et homo factus est.

And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit
of the virgin Mary, and was made man.

11. Crucifixus

Levin has composed a double-fugue for four-part chorus and orchestra, based on a Mozart sketch from 1783. Chorus basses introduce the subject, while the countersubject is heard from the orchestra. Eventually, the fugal writing gives way to more solemn, largely homophonic treatment, and for the final portion of the text, dealing with death and burial, the vocal parts are reduced to simple block chords. The movement ends in hushed sadness.

*Crucifixus etiam pro nobis:
sub Pontio Pilato passus
et sepultus est.*

He was also crucified for us;
he suffered under Pontius Pilate
and was buried.

12. Et resurrexit

Levin's four-part chorus is based on another 1783 sketch and a motive taken from the "Credo in unum Deum" movement, reasoning that Mozart often enhanced unity in larger works by reusing material from one movement in a later one. Proceeding at a brisk *Allegro vivace*, the music expresses jubilation at the Lord's triumph over death.

*Et resurrexit tertia die,
secundum Scripturas.
Et ascendit in caelum:
sedet ad dexteram Patris.
Et iterum venturus est cum gloria,
iudicare vivos et mortuos:
cujus regni no erit finis.*

And he was resurrected the third day,
as foretold in the Scriptures.
And he ascended into heaven,
sitting to the right of the Father.
And he will come again with glory
to judge the living and the dead;
his kingdom shall not end.

13. Et in Spiritum Sanctum

Levin has taken a soprano aria from *Davidde penitente*, "Tra l'oscure ombre funeste," transposed it down to a key that Mozart would have used in this case, and set it to words for the tenor. The soloist has adoringly florid melismas on the word "adoratur."

*Et in Spiritum Sanctum,
Dominum, et vivificantem:
qui ex Patre et Filioque procedit.
Qui cum Patre et Filio
simul adoratur et conglorificatur:
qui locutus est per Prophetas.*

And [I believe] in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord and life-giver,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son
is equally adored and glorified;
who spoke through the Prophets.

14. Et unam sanctam

Mozart left a sketch of the joyous ending of this movement, and Levin has devised a simpler, more emphatic form of the music as a beginning.

*Et unam sanctam catholicam
et apostolicam Ecclesiam.
Confiteor unum baptisma
in remissionem peccatorum.
Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum . . .*

And [I believe in] one holy, universal
and apostolic Church,
I acknowledge one baptism
for the remission of sins,
and I await the resurrection of the dead . . .

15. Et vitam venturi

The last words of the “Credo” text, referring to a happy afterlife for believers, usually inspires a composer to write a glorious concluding fugue, and Levin has honored this tradition. His four-part choral fugue takes its subject from a countersubject in the “Kyrie,” employing contrapuntal procedures only hinted at by Mozart’s treatment in the earlier movement.

... *Et vitam venturi saeculi. Amen.*

... And life in the world to come. Amen.

IV. SANCTUS

16. Sanctus – Hosanna

Raising its voices in magnificent harmony, the eight-part chorus thunders and whispers its praise. The “Osanna” is an earnest double fugue, accomplished with great mastery and ending in shouts of joy.

*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus,
Dominus Deus Sabaoth.
Pleni sunt coeli et terra
gloria tua.*

Holy, holy, holy,
Lord God of Hosts.
The heavens and earth are full
of your glory.

Osanna in excelsis.

Hosanna in the highest.

V. BENEDICTUS

17. Benedictus – Hosanna

The bass soloist, heard for the first time, completes the solo quartet for an inventive and virtuosic ensemble piece. Repeating the final part of the previous movement’s “Hosanna,” the double chorus adds a last outpouring of exultation.

*Benedictus qui venit
in nomine Domini.*

Blessed is the one who comes
in the name of the Lord.

Osanna in excelsis.

Hosanna in the highest.

VI. AGNUS DEI

18. Agnus Dei

Once again Levin draws upon material from *Davidde penitente*, using the introductory music to the same aria that he appropriated earlier for the tenor solo (“Et in Spiritum Sanctum”), this time without transposing. He gives the liturgically correct third repetition to the chorus, leaving the completion of its entreaty for the final movement, which follows without pause.

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,
misere nobis.*

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,
misere nobis.*

*Agnus Dei,
qui tollis peccata mundi, . . .*

Lamb of God, who takes away the world's sin,
have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, who takes away the world's sin,
have mercy on us.

Lamb of God,
who takes away the world's sin, . . .

19. Dona nobis pacem

Mozart's workshop materials from 1783 include two sketches for a "Dona nobis pacem." They are in C minor and are generally assumed to have been intended for this Mass. Levin has based his conclusion on these sketches, composing a grand fugal statement for soloists and four-part chorus.

. . . Dona nobis pacem.

. . . Grant us peace.

– Notes and English translation by Nick Jones

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